

# *Discipline and Your Young Child*

## **Overview**

A positive approach to discipline offers an alternative to nagging, yelling, and punishing. It's a matter of setting clear limits and expectations, and following through consistently.

- What is "positive discipline"?
- Your child as an individual
- Setting clear limits and realistic expectations
- Setting limits with preschoolers
- Acknowledge your child's feelings
- Don't expect perfection

Your toddler just had his second tantrum (this week!) in the grocery store. Your preschooler refuses to get dressed in the morning. Your 5-year-old has been hitting other kids on the playground. Every child is different, of course, but chances are that more than once you've found yourself wondering how on earth you can teach your child to behave. Here are some ideas and tips that may help.

## **What is "positive discipline"?**

Positive discipline means *teaching* -- helping a child learn self-control. It doesn't mean *punishment*. As a parent, you have to set almost all the limits and rules for your young child right now. But by setting clear limits and disciplining in a positive, loving way, you can help your child begin to learn how to control her own behavior, how to set her own limits. Punishment may let her know she's made a mistake, but it won't help her learn how to change the way she behaves.

## **Your child as an individual**

Every child has her own style of exploring and reacting to the world, from babyhood on. Although you have the same basic expectations from each of your children, it can be helpful to adapt the way you discipline each child according to her personality. This does not mean having different rules for each child. One child may be highly active, or move quickly from one activity to another. She may need more frequent reminding of the limits or more help in doing what is expected. Another child may need more time to move into a new situation or get used to change -- whether it is meeting new people, going to a new place or trying a new activity. She may need more explanation and/or more advance notice of a new limit or expectation to be ready to adapt to it.

## **Setting clear limits and realistic expectations**

Young children aren't little adults. It's perfectly normal for them to want things right away and to think only about themselves. It's still hard for them to control their impulses. They're constantly exploring and testing limits. It can be difficult sometimes to know what is reasonable to expect from a child at different ages and in different situations.

It can be hard to set limits with children. We want our children to love us. But our job as parents isn't to be our children's favorite person all the time. If your child says, "I hate you!" sometimes, it's probably a sign that you're doing your job as a parent. Making your expectations clear, setting limits, and being

consistent are all key to being an effective parent. Here are some tips that can help:

- *Try to give your child some undivided attention every day.* This can be tough in a busy family, but it's important. If your child feels that you are listening to her, she'll be more likely to listen to you.
- *Plan ahead.* Sometimes you can help just by thinking ahead. If you have to go to the supermarket when your child is tired and hungry, bring a favorite snack so he can munch while you shop.
- *Avoid threats and comparisons.* Calling a child names, blaming, or comparing him with "good" friends or siblings doesn't help him understand how he should behave; it just confirms his feelings that he's bad. Be encouraging! Instead of saying, "You are so messy! Your cousin always puts his things away," you might say, "I know you can pick up your clothes. If you need help, I'll help you." Instead of saying, "If you don't get washed right now, you'll never get a bedtime story!" try, "As soon as you get washed, we can have a bedtime story."
- *Use diversion rather than confrontation.* If you see yourself beginning to lock horns with your child, try breaking the cycle by suggesting alternatives -- a new activity or a different toy -- or by doing something silly. Cluck like a chicken. Say something outrageous. Humor can be a wonderful tool for diverting a child from a stubborn position.
- *When your child does misbehave,* be specific about the behavior you didn't like. Use clear, firm words and gestures. Instead of saying, "You're so mean! Leave that cat alone!" you might say, "It hurts the cat when you pull her tail that way. Try patting her on the back gently, like this."
- *If you have to, physically remove your child from a problem.* When your child continues to throw sand after you've told him to stop twice, gently but firmly remove him from the sandbox. Explain what you're doing as you take him away. "Throwing sand is not OK. It can get in someone's eyes. If you throw sand, it tells me you're not ready to be with the other kids. You let me know when you are ready and we'll go back."
- *Choose your battles.* It can be very frustrating when your child says or does something that isn't necessarily what you want. But it's a normal, healthy part of growing up and finding out who he is. When you and your child are heading for conflict, try to put things in perspective. It may help to ask yourself, "Is this *really* important? Will it matter a week from now?" If he refuses to take off his superhero T-shirt, for instance, you may decide it's OK to let him wear it - as long as he wears a jacket over it when it's cold.

### Setting limits with toddlers

Once your child is crawling, and then walking and increasingly physically able to explore, she will need to learn about boundaries and limits for her own safety. Words will not usually be enough because she is just beginning to use language. In addition to saying “No” you will need to be on alert to move her hand away from something she should not touch or lead her away from an unsafe situation before she can hurt herself. You will notice during this phase that more and more she will look to see your reaction when she heads toward a forbidden object. This is all part of learning the limits, and what may feel like endless times of saying “No” are a necessary part of it.

You can also help your toddler by planning ahead. Identify potentially hazardous situations in your home and “child proof” them (put gates at the top of stairs, keep dangerous items out of reach in the kitchen and bathroom, etc.) If you know he enjoys pulling everything off the shelves, or from tabletops, move the breakable items out of reach and replace them with his toys.

Young toddlers are often in situations where their desires and strong feelings get ahead of their ability to control their behavior or to know how their actions affect other people. By the time they are about 2 years old, toddlers are able to learn about their own feelings and the feelings of others. They have developed enough language to be able to listen and talk with you about what they feel and see. This is an important opportunity to begin to help your child develop sympathy and concern for others.

- *From the ages of 1 year to 2 years, use very simple statements about limits: “You can’t have that,” or “Put that back,” or “Don’t touch that.”*
- *Be prepared to remind your toddler of the limits, preferably before he gets into trouble, by frowning, or gesturing or saying “No.”* If possible, make your tone of voice calm but firm. Try to avoid shouting; it will not make him understand better and may just frighten him. If you find yourself shouting because you lose your temper, or are frightened because you find your toddler in a dangerous situation, you can remove him from the situation first, and then calm down and talk to him in simple language. “I’m sorry I shouted at you, but I was really afraid you would get hurt. I love you and I want to keep you safe.”
- *Help your toddler learn to use language to express her feelings and wishes rather than physically lashing out.* If you talk with her about feelings as part of everyday life, she will gradually be able to do the same thing. “I’m sad that Grandma won’t be able to visit today, but when she comes next week I’ll be very happy to see her.” “It was scary when that big dog across the street barked at us.” “When you dumped your toys all over the living room floor I was angry because you are supposed to keep your toys in your room.”

- *Remember that toddlers need to understand that even though you get upset when they don't follow the rules, you still love them.* If your child seems frightened or sad after you discipline him, you can say, "You know, even if I get angry with you when you do something you shouldn't, I always love you. Would you like a hug?"

Common behavioral problems with toddlers

As they begin to explore and test their growing sense of independence, many toddlers go through challenging behavioral stages, including biting or hitting. Here are some tips for handling these problems:

- *If your toddler is with other children her own age and grabs a toy from another child, go over to her right away.* Say something like, "That is not your toy -- it is Susie's. Give it back to her." Give her a little time to comply and if she doesn't, take the toy away gently but firmly, saying, "Susie has to get her toy back." You may be faced with screams and tears at this point. You can hug your little one and say something like, "I know you liked that toy, but you can't take it away from Susie. Let's find another toy for you."
- *If your 1- to 2-year-old hits or bites another child, you can simply say, "It's not OK to hit/bite other people" and take her out of the situation.* If she seems calm enough later to go back to play, you can bring her back, and remind her as she starts to play, "Remember, no biting or hitting." If your 2-year-old hits or bites, you can say, "You know it hurts when you bite or hit someone and you know it is not OK. Can you play without biting or hitting?" If your child seems very upset or out of control, say, "I am going to take you away from the sandbox until you think you are ready to come back to play." With a 2-year-old, you can talk about his feelings and the other child's. "Did you feel angry at Sam? Did you want to play with that toy right away?" "How do you think Sam felt when you hit/bit him? It really hurt. Maybe he won't want to play with you now. Can you tell him you are sorry?"

### Setting limits with preschoolers

Preschoolers can begin to understand and even welcome routines and consistent expectations -- but that doesn't mean they won't test them! Even though they have more language skills to hear and follow "the rules," they will still need frequent reminding as they enter each situation. When they are going into a new or stressful situation like meeting new people, going to a new place, or going to the doctor, it will be helpful if you talk over with them ahead of time what the situation will be like, answer any of their questions, and review what you will expect from them.

- *Be clear about how you want your child to behave.* Instead of general orders like "Be good," or "Be nice," try to be specific. "I need quiet while I'm driving. Please use a quiet voice."

- *Keep it short and simple.* Don't give a lecture when a simple statement will do the job. Your child may need a quick reminder about food in the living room: "Food stays at the table." But leave it at that.
- *Be consistent.* Young children can't understand why they can stay up late tonight but not tomorrow, or why they can have cookies before lunch but not before dinner. Stick to your own rules and routines as much as possible. If you're occasionally inconsistent, grumpy, or short-tempered, don't worry. It's OK to say, "I was wrong," and let your child know you can make mistakes too.
- *Use a positive approach.* Try to tell your child what you want her to do rather than what you want her to stop doing. If you remind her that "Paper is for coloring," you may not have to tell her, "Don't draw on the walls!" If she's unhappy, try, "Use a big kid's voice when you tell me about it," instead of "You're such a baby. Stop that whining!"
- *Praise your child's good behavior!* Everyone learns more from being praised than from being criticized. Letting your child know when she's done something *right* is one of the best ways to help her understand what kind of behavior you expect. Honest, specific praise generally works best. "You must feel proud -- you put your toys away all by yourself!"
- *Talk to your child with the respect you would give another adult.* Children, just like adults, appreciate being spoken to and treated with respect. Think of the words you use with your child when you're frustrated. Now imagine talking that way to another adult. A respectful approach is more effective with anyone – child or adult.
- *Offer choices.* Children have so little power in the family that they sometimes misbehave just to show that they have some control over their lives. Instead of crushing that little bit of power, recognize your child's need to have some dignity and control by offering choices. Suggest one or two options and let him choose. If it's time to get dressed, you might ask, "Do you want to wear the green shirt with the dinosaur or the blue one with the panda?" If he's using the furniture as a trampoline, try, "Couches are for sitting. You can either sit on the couch or you can jump on the floor."

### **Acknowledge your child's feelings**

You may need to correct a child's behavior from time to time. But you can never correct her feelings. Your child may be mad at her younger brother. She may be angry at you and tell you so. When she does, it's fine for you to put limits on how she acts -- she can't hurt her brother, for example, and she can't hit or kick you. But at the same time you can let her know that it's OK to feel angry or sad. Instead of saying, "That's nothing to be mad about," or "Don't be so upset," try saying, "I know you're angry at your brother. But you can't grab toys away from him." Or, "It must be disappointing that Joey didn't want

to come over.” Children need to know that you understand and respect their feelings – even as you set limits on how they act.

### **Don't expect perfection**

Your child will make mistakes -- and so will you. You will get mad sometimes and say things you wish you hadn't. Your child will forget the rules sometimes or have days when he tests your patience. Be forgiving. And never be too proud to apologize. The good news is that parents do get second chances. Lots of them.

Disciplining a young child involves love, understanding, and patience. It's a long, ongoing process. But as your child grows, your continuing, caring discipline can help him learn to make his own judgments about right and wrong and begin to take responsibility for his own actions.